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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN: HELSINKI COMMISSION COUNSEL'S FIRST VISIT

REF: DUSHANBE 541

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11. (U) SUMMARY: H. Knox Thames, Counsel for the U.S. Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the Helsinki Commission, visited Tajikistan June 14-17 for the first time. During his trip, he met with political party representatives, religious leaders, government officials, and university students. Thames urged Tajik leaders to adhere to international standards for human rights and democracy, particularly admonishing the fatwa banning women from attending mosques, government crackdown on girls wearing hijabs in public schools, Democratic Party of Tajikistan Chairman Iskandarov's imprisonment and other intimidation targets at political party leaders. He assured officials that U.S. Representatives and Senators of the Helsinki Commission are closely watching Tajikistan's presidential election and hope that it will be a fair election. Thames encountered the typical Tajik government talking points when meeting with officials, however, many leaders were willing to discuss openly areas of change for Tajikistan. END SUMMARY.

GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS SKIRT THE LINE

12. (U) In Thames' meetings with government officials at the Ministry of Justice, CCER, MFA and the State Committee on Religious Affairs (SCRA), as expected, some officials toed the government line, but others were willing to speak more frankly. Deputy Minister of Justice Sharipova, told Thames and PolOff that it was time Tajikistan has an ombudsman. She also said that reinstating International Committee of the Red Crescent's access to prisons in Tajikistan should be possible and blamed the problem on low-level bureaucrats in the Ministry. She

noted that recently the Minister had ordered access for any organization willing to provide assistance. Speaking on human rights, Thames encouraged the Ministry of Justice to apply to the OSCE to provide police anti-hate crimes and anti-terrorism training.

¶3. (SBU) The government's close watch on human rights and freedom of religion activists was evident in the fact that a Ministry of Security official attended Thames' meeting with the Head of the Regional Islamic Council in Khujand. Because of the official's presence, the cautious Head of the Council claimed that Muslims in the region did not have any problems with hijjabs or mosque closures. Ismatullo Nasriddinov at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs summed up Tajikistan's reasoning behind their deficiencies in human rights by reminding Thames that Tajikistan is a young country and cannot complete all the reforms and abide by all international ideals "today, right this minute, right this second."

RECOMMENDED CHANGES: FROM NEW DRAFT LAW ON RELIGION TO
RECOGNIZING HT

¶4. (SBU) Thames held a roundtable meeting with six religious leaders from various denominations, including a mufti from the Council of Ulamo. The mufti expressed relatively liberal ideas and condemned the fatwa that prohibited women from attending mosque. He also openly said that the draft law on religion needs to be revised (reftel). All representatives reiterated discontent with the draft law, but cautioned the international community not to condemn Tajikistan immediately. They would like to see all religious organizations have a chance to work with the government on the law. The Vatican's representative questioned the Center for Strategic Research Studies and U.S. AID assisted conference on regional Islamic affairs and suggested that a conference including all religions be organized in the region to discuss important issues pertaining to all,

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such as the draft law.

¶5. (SBU) During Thames' Khujand visit, a common message from both the Mayor and Head of the Regional Islamic Council was the need to curb Hizb ut Tahrir (HT) membership. High youth unemployment and illiteracy lead many people to easily succumb to HT influence. Not having formal education in Islamic studies many turn to HT teachings. Faiziniso Vohidova, a Social Democratic Party of Tajikistan activist told Thames the government should change its policy towards HT. Although she disagreed with HT's message and practices, she called on the government to allow HT to operate. She hoped that Tajikistan can fight HT ideologically and with public debate because their underground nature is what draws members.

¶6. (SBU) In Thames' meeting with Qadi Akbar Turajonzoda, a wealthy Imam in the Vahdat district 40 minutes from Dushanbe and former deputy of parliament, Turajonzoda expressed disappointment with the U.S.'s inability to "force" free and fair elections. (COMMENT: If only it were that easy. END COMMENT.) PolOff explained the U.S. Embassy and the American government has been working with political parties, the Central Committee on Election and Referenda, IFES and international organizations to improve the democratic election processes. Turajonzoda said that he would be delighted if the Americans could do one thing: influence the Tajik government to allow political party representatives to sit in on the district election committees (DECs). The most important point of fraud will occur when the government appointed DECs "validate" votes. If political parties were involved in DECs, it would show the Tajik people that the votes were legitimately validated.

¶7. (SBU) Thames informed PolOff some congress representatives will likely write letters to President Rahmonov urging him to reform election laws and procedures. Thames also said that he would strongly encourage future Congressional delegations visit Dushanbe. He hoped to return to Dushanbe in November as an OSCE

election observer.

18. (U) COMMENT: Thames left Tajikistan with a very positive impression. He was pleasantly surprised by the green and open environment of the city compared to other Central Asian capitals. Even though they were not entirely forthcoming with information, government officials were willing to meet with Thames. Local Tajiks are eager to meet with Americans and always ready and willing to show-off their Tajik hospitality and some will even share their honest opinion. Post welcomes more visitors from Congress to see for themselves Tajikistan and the role it plays as a strategic partner in the region. END COMMENT.

19. (U) Thames did not have the opportunity to clear this cable.
ARMBRUSTER